

The centre of hope in the Story of the Risen Lord.

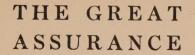
PROPERTY OF
NORTHEASTERN BIBLE INSTITUTE LIBRARY
ESSEX FELLS NEW JERSEY

Stay your heart on the sternal lights of faith; diorde in the Eternal.









GEORGE A. GORDON, D.D.



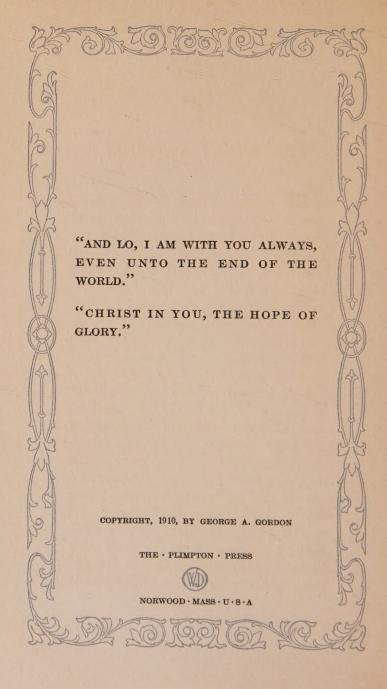
THE MASTER'S COLLECE POWELL LIEDARY SMITA CLARITA, CA 91321

#1663

THE PILGRIM PRESS

BOSTON NEW YORK CHICAGO

NORTHEASTERN BIBLE INSTITUTE LIBRARY
ESSEX FELLS, NEW JERSEY



THE center of hope in the Gospels lies in the story of the risen Lord. What is the hardest to grasp for the disciple of Jesus to-day was the clearest and surest to the apostles. Had there been no gospel of the risen Lord there would have been no gospel at all. That which comes last in the evangelical narrative came first in the faith of the apostles. Their assurance that their Master was alive made it of infinite moment to preserve some image of his person, his words, his ministry, and his death. The earthly career of the Lord assumed transcendent worth in the minds of his first disciples the day and hour in which they became convinced that he had triumphed over death. With them the Easter gospel was first; it was the origin of their faith; it led them to a just understanding of all that went before; it brought them to believe that some memorial of

Jesus in the days of his flesh would be inexpressibly precious to mankind.

This order of belief is reversed in the case of the disciples of Jesus to-day. We see at once the incomparable loftiness and beauty of his spirit, the unparalleled depth and purity of his religious and moral teaching, the splendor of his conception of the kingdom of God, the subtlety and the majesty of his idea of eternal life. We are swift to agree that the idealism of Jesus, personal and social, is the sublimest vision in the records of our race. We are sure, too, that he must have been a great benefactor to his people. He taught the poor to take refuge in ideas, to find rest in him and in his secret; at the same time he did a work that could not be adequately estimated then, that has never been adequately measured since, for all sorts of human beings in all forms of trouble and distress. We are ready with our appreciations of Jesus the reformer and martyr. Never man so declared war against the inhumanity of the world; never man so consolidated against himself in his service of the Highest the superstition and

the malice of an age; never man so moved to his death, and in his death laid open the forces of love and magnanimity that recreate human society. We confess at once that nothing in all history is comparable to the benign and sublime manner in which Jesus moved to his cross. He accepted death as the wages of perfect obedience to his vision of the kingdom of God; and he died in a way that fills the world with awe and unutterable homage and love. When, however, we come to the story of the risen Lord, we become vague; we lose him in the perplexing accounts of his appearance to his apostles after his death; and when we turn to Paul and hear from him the great challenge, "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" we often are unable to attach any clear meaning to it.

Let us assume that somehow these words were breathed into the souls of the apostles from their risen Master, "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." These words mark the end of one way of fellowship with Jesus and the beginning of another and a mightier; they are

like a sunset in time and a sunrise in the eternal world. From henceforth these apostles are to teach and toil, suffer and serve in his kingdom in the burning presence of their unseen Lord; and as the promise made to them was made to all his disciples then and since, our work and our whole appointed career in this world are to be in the presence of the perpetual Christ.

In these words, "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world," are contained what I call the Great Assurance. It is easy enough to raise difficulties, to mention things uncomprehended in this assurance, and things about it incomprehensible. I believe it is possible through the guidance of such words, in spite of all difficulties, and notwithstanding our ignorance, to find solid ground on which to rest our faith in the living Lord.

Here let me ask the three questions which I am to try to answer. First, on what grounds do we believe that Jesus is alive to-day? Second, how may we gain access to fellowship with the mind and soul of Jesus now? Third,

what are some of the benefits, the incomparable benefits to the human spirit from admission to the mind of Jesus and association with him? These propositions go to the heart of the Christian faith. To discuss them in a plain manner, to aim at instruction, and not at excitement, is my serious obligation; to give earnest heed to what is written is the equally serious obligation of the reader. We are at the center of faith; can we give and receive light here? Let that question be our guide and our judge.

On what grounds do we believe that Jesus is alive to-day? First of all, on the ground that our Christian religion was originally the religion of the risen Lord. The arrest of Jesus, his trial and condemnation, the mockery to which his claims had been reduced, the ridicule and scorn with which his Kinghood had been visited, and finally his death upon the cross between two thieves, scattered his disciples like sheep, and smote his cause with ruin. When Jesus hung dead upon the cross his cause was dead in Jerusalem. There is the fact. Every scholar knows it,

every intelligent Christian is aware of it.

In a few days a revolution has taken place, the scattered disciples are reassembled; they are reassembled in the clear and sure belief that their Master is alive. One line of evidence for this belief is given in the Gospels; another line is presented in the experience of Paul. There are doubtless difficulties in the report as it has come down to us; every serious reader knows that the difficulties are there and every considerate reader is prepared to meet difficulties in the record of an event so transcendent. About the fact, the reality of the risen Lord, there is, however, ultimately no doubt. All the apostles, including the noble skeptic of their band, Thomas, all the time and without the shadow of a doubt so far as we know, from that date to the end of their lives, believed that Jesus was alive and reigning and ruling their hearts out of the unseen. This is the original wonder, that a dead cause came to life when the friends of that cause became convinced that the Master of it was not dead but alive. Christian-

GREAT ASSURANCE

ity began in the consciousness of the Lord who had triumphed over death, and who from the unseen inspired and guided his apostles and disciples. that fact be duly pondered. *

The apostolic witness to the reality of the living Christ extends itself naturally into the historic witness. men who have been the great Christians, who have been able, so to speak, to set the type for their brethren, have begun with the evangelical witness. They have pondered the testimony of the apostles to the risen Master; this testimony rendered in a new character, a new humanity, and in ministries to the human spirit of inexpressible movement, has profoundly impressed them. They were thus introduced to Jesus Christ as living; at this point begins their own experience. In the presence of Christ they see the depth of their depravity and at the same time they are filled with hope. Ideals rise upon them that overwhelm them with a sense of their sinfulness and worthlessness; and again these ideals as they rise out of the life of the Lord carry in them his pity, his call to renewed endeavor,

and they shed into the broken will a new and a victorious moral power. The impossible now becomes easy; the old life of selfishness, coarse or refined, becomes an object of loathing; these souls cry out for freedom and they gain it. All this happens in the presence of the living Lord to whom they have been introduced. In his presence these men are shot through with the sense of sin and shame over their misdeeds; in his presence their hearts melt in penitence; through him they receive an incomparable accession of moral power; in his name they go forth to subdue the beast in themselves and to do something toward the subjugation of the beast in the life of the great world. Thus gaining through Christ an experience answering in character and power to the experiences of the apostles, these typical historic Christians conclude that their life is the witness that their Lord is alive now. A similar experience is the warrant for a similar belief; therefore we are not surprised to find that never from the day of Pentecost till now have the great typical disciples of Jesus believed

in anything other than a Christ alive to-day. To this conclusion they were introduced by the apostles; to this conclusion they were compelled by the power of their Christian experience.

The apostolic and the historic witnesses to the reality of the living Lord complete themselves in the contemporary witness. Here we listen to the testimony of our hearts. Have we undergone any experience similar to that of the apostles of Jesus, similar to that of the great typical disciples of Jesus in all the Christian centuries? Have we ever stood in the presence of the Lord? In that presence have we been called to account for our misdeeds? While face to face with him have we seen sin as the infinite evil, and deliverance from it as the infinite good? Have we then and there known anything of an accusing conscience, secret shame, refusal to be comforted in the presence of our worthlessness, revolt from it, penitence, prayer, forgiveness, incoming tides of triumphant moral power, the vision of life's vocation as the pursuit and service of the Christian ideal, reconciliation in God to the order of his world,

the way of the cross as the way of light, the sense of growing freedom and hope?

If we have passed through some such experience as this the testimony of our life is a witness to the living Lord. We were led to the Lord by the witness of his apostles; that witness was illuminated out of great historic lives, perhaps out of hearts near to our own; in the presence of these testimonies to the living Master we looked unto the Lord for ourselves; we were enlightened; we have the witness of our own hearts. Through Jesus Christ we have received from God the grace that is working salvation in our souls. We believe, therefore, that he who mediates life to the souls of men to-day is himself alive. The evangelical, the historic, and the contemporary witnesses to the risen and reigning Lord agree.

Does all this seem to be unreal, something in the air, subtle, elusive, the product of imagination and not of fact? It may seem to be so and yet be far otherwise. Perhaps we think under the tyranny of the senses; perhaps we judge

according to appearance and fail in righteous judgment. It may be well, therefore, to face the truth that there are but two possible objections to the reality of the living Lord attested as we have seen. The first objection is presented in the statement that a spiritual being cannot be known; the second objection rests upon the absence of the experience that would justify the conclusion that Christ is alive.

The first objection that a spiritual being cannot be known is pure dogmatism. It assumes all knowledge regarding the possibilities of knowledge; it advances an agnosticism based upon omniscience. It is as futile in restraint of the scientific intellect as the shell is to keep within itself the mature chicken, or as a blizzard in the path of the earth to delay its ongoing. There are no assignable limits to human knowledge, and those who draw them amuse themselves as children do when they build sea-walls of sand to keep back the incoming tide. In the intellect of man a new advance, a fresh advance of the tide to the flood, and they are gone.

Is it true that we cannot know the

spiritual or non-sensuous? There is electricity. Its effects are in the field of sense; electricity itself is not in the field of sense; yet we know it as power. Physical life eludes the senses; it fills the world with the tokens of its presence; but life itself, by which the flower blooms, the bird flies and sings, the animal moves and grows, is inaccessible to sense; yet we know it as fact and power and we have a science named in its honor and service, the science of biology. To say that a spiritual agent or being cannot be known is to affirm that a mother cannot know her child: the thinking, feeling, willing power in that child the mother cannot see, cannot get at by any of the senses. Yet she is not therefore denied the privilege of knowing her child. She reads the mind and heart and will through the signs that her child makes; smiles and tears, pain and gladness, need and satisfaction, appeals and responses, are the gateways by which the spirit of the mother embraces the spirit of her child.

The denial that we can know a spiritual being is the denial that we can know God. No man hath seen

God at any time; he is the King immortal, invisible, whom no man hath seen or can see. God is a Spirit, and they who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. Such is the great tradition concerning God in the New Testament. Are we then excluded from all knowledge of God? May we not study his mind in his works? May we not know something of him by the exact observation of the cosmos? He is the Maker of man, and again in the human constitution in action, may we not draw near to God? There is society and there is history. and again may we not meet God there? Is it not about as silly a proposition as we can frame to affirm that a spiritual being cannot be known? If it means that for a spiritual being there is no direct sense evidence, that is true; but then this is a truism. All that you mean is that the baby's soul, inasmuch as it is non-sensuous, cannot paint itself on the retina of the mother's eye; you do not mean that the mother's soul cannot know the soul of her child. If you mean that you are more than mistaken; your much learning has made you mad.

The second objection does not deny that Jesus as he lives in the spiritual world may be known; the person who makes it merely asserts that he has no experience to justify him in concluding that Christ is alive. This is probably the exact truth; but the absence of the proper experience may be due to the fault of the confessor. There is such a thing in Christian churches and communities as a pagan mind. Such minds one sees every day, and they are of two classes; they are composed of the person of arid respectability and the individual of distinctly wicked life. Our respectable person loves the world and the flesh and dexterously avoids the devil; our wicked person is unable to make the plunge of Niagara and "stop half-way down." Both these persons are destitute of spiritual experience, and therefore are incompetent as reasoners concerning the spiritual.

Here, for example, is an electric battery. One man takes hold of it unconscious, let us say, that he has on insulating gloves. He feels no shock, he can testify to no electric current; his experience does not enable him

to conclude that electric power is there. Where is the trouble? It is in the person who is making the experiment. Let him shed those insulating gloves; let him take hold of the battery in the proper way; let him give it a fair chance to show its power and his experience will quickly assume a new character and justify a different conclusion. Our pagan insulates himself from the power of the living Lord; and upon his insulated experience builds his denial. Let him come into the presence of the conscience of Christ; let him see himself as the pagan sinner that he is; let him vow and covenant to cease his inhumanity and henceforth to enlist as a soldier in the kingdom of God; let him take hold of Christ through the sense of guilt and shame, through penitence, prayer, and fellowship with Christ's disciples; let him receive the shock of new and conquering moral power; let him tremble and cry out over the joy and the pain of this electric visitation; then perhaps he too may be ready to sing with all the true disciples of Jesus from the beginning till now, "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

[19]

This brings us to the second general question: How may we gain admission to the mind of Jesus now? There are several answers to this great question, and the first is that we may gain admission to the mind of the Lord through the record of his career on the earth. There is the record in those four Memorials of Jesus that we call the gospels, the precious record, shining with the splendor of wisdom, beautiful with atmosphere, instinct with the sublime and tender soul of the Teacher. How often have you read the Gospels during the last five years? How much time, in your whole life, have you given to the study of the words of Jesus? How much time have you ever given the appreciation of the scenery of his earthly pilgrimage? How much pains have you taken to enter the space and the time in which he lived, the land from north to south, from sea to desert, and from desert to sea? How hard have you tried to follow Jesus in his ministry, in his works of mercy of every description, in his Sermon on the Mount, in the succession of his Parables, in the whole body of his teaching?

Ought not the disciples of Jesus to be so familiar with his words and his ways on earth as to be able, in case of loss, to recreate from the loving and conserving heart these Memorials of the Lord?

It will not do for the disciples of Jesus to give fine names and titles to the Master and sweet compliments to the gospels, and then pay no further heed either to him or them. Here is a book that every Christian church should know by heart; that book is the first approach to the mind of Christ. Here in this book is the great image of him, comprehensive, full of color, full of detail, immortal in loveliness. Lift that image and bear it into the hall of imagination; there let it stand a monument comparable to nothing in the whole realm of art, so great in beauty, so transcendent; and in that hall of imagination look at it every morning and every evening; lift up your eyes to this image of the Lord as he lives in the eternal world, and through it enter into communion with him.

Have you never read great Christian biographies? I shall never forget the effect, the double effect, produced

upon me when I read the life of Horace Bushnell,—clear, grand, pioneering, adventurous soul that he was, a kind of Columbus going through storms, beating hither and beating thither, always with a forward look, how great and tender, how manly and fine that soul seemed; yet in him I found something better than he. There was One working in him, and I gained an image of Bushnell's Christ from reading Bushnell's life. The same experience was repeated in reading another equally great life, that of Frederick Dennison Maurice; in reading another life not so great, but yet beautiful, that of Dean Stanley; in reading still another, in its own way peculiarly great, the life of the Christian poet, Tennyson; and yet another, the life of a great Christian statesman, Gladstone, — a man in the tumult of the world, in the rage and fury of politics, so clean that while all men might say he was in error, no man of sincerity and knowledge ever said he was intentionally untrue to his Master! One might go on along that line, looking into the heart of the robust, courageous nation-making John Knox, into the soul

of Luther, the world-shaker of his time. into St. Francis of Assisi, sweet and gracious spirit, so that the birds of heaven came to share his friendship. into the passionate and tremendous nature of Augustine, on and back to apostolic times. Here is another image, an image of the dynamic Christ as he works in the souls of his great typical disciples. Gather from these lives his image and put it beside the image from the evangelical record; it is not so great as that, but it is worthy to stand next it; and through that second monumental form in the great hall of imagination commune with the living Lord.

Has Jesus done nothing for us? Must we make that confession? No. We know that we have seen the ideal in his eyes; we know that we have given up the evil life because of the constraining power of his love; we know that he has made for us obligation a privilege, service a song, sorrow a means of purification and hope. Take the image of the Lord as he works in your own life, and put it next to the historic image, and let these three images stand together, in the silent mystic-colored hall

of imagination, — the evangelical, the historic, the contemporary and personal; and through these images, imperfect as they are, enter into communion with the mind of the reigning, invisible, glorified, and glorious Christ.

Our third general question has now arrived: What are some of the incomparable benefits that flow into the disciples' life from fellowship with his Lord? I mention first of all the supreme benefit, a Christian conscience. How dim our sense becomes of the eternal distinction between right and wrong, between essential good and essential evil! How easy it is for us to be conformed to the custom of the pagan world, to join it in its ambition, amusement, and neglect of righteousness; to dismiss with it all regard for the unfortunate, all concern for the weak, all conscience for the fine souls caught in the tragic courses of time; to preach with it the survival of the fittest and the relentless march of brute force. oblivious of the worth and the beauty that it tramples underfoot! The minister of Christ sees the dust on the wings of his people every week, the

stain on their plumage. He sees that the sovereign need of his people is association with the conscience of Christ. Out of that association comes a sensibility to sin, a pain to feel it near, and an eye for honor, as all-seeing and alldiscovering as the sun in his course from east to west. From years of training in the gymnasium, the strong but green lad from the country issues the mighty athlete; from fellowship with the conscience of Jesus, the crude but prophetic Christian comes forth a new being, new in perceptive power, new in the consciousness that he is living in the tremendous moral world of God. Hither the Christian church must come. It has become dim in its sense of right; it is careless in its behavior; it is too much at ease in Zion; its salvation is taken as a matter of course: it has become oblivious of the vital heaven and hell in the awful courses of human experience; it has forgotten that it remains a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. There is an audacious, an impudent unconcern for the eternal laws of righteousness; and the only

sure way to recover the lost vision and seriousness is through constant and devout fellowship with the sternly tender and conscientious Master.

Another benefit is education of intellect in the ideas of the Christian faith. I have people come to me with prejudices and pagan notions centuries old, clinging to them because they happened to be part, not of the vital faith, but of the impedimenta of their ancestors. What would vou think of a scientist who should follow a Newton or a Copernicus not only in his truth but also in his exploded error? Follow the truth in your ancestors and not the error; follow your parents where they followed Christ, not where they wandered from him. Your Lord is the ruler of your intellect, not your kindred. Bring your historic inheritance, your heterodoxies and your orthodoxies, all the complaisant and callous conceits of your mind, into the presence of the mind of Christ. Judge your intellect in his presence and by the ideas that are worthy of him. Do you suppose that the doctrine that unbaptized infants are eternally damned would have

lived for an hour if men had taken it for judgment to the mind of the Lord? The revision of Christian belief by the Master of the Christian world is another of our great needs. What is worthy when tested in his presence we may hold, what is unworthy we must refuse to hold, even if all the ecclesiastical councils of the centuries should solemnly decree it to be the truth. He who lives with the mind of the Lord has two vast assurances to guide his thought: he knows that only those ideas worthy of the Lord can be true: he knows that his intellect is in the school of endless expansion and purification.

Hither we come for comfort. The world is still, in so many instances, a broken-hearted world, with spikes in its hands and in its feet. It needs comfort. Is there any comfort like the comfort that is in Christ, any consolation like the consolation of his love, any fellowship like the fellowship of his spirit? Is he not still calling, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and

learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"?

Finally there comes through fellowship with the Lord freedom from that meanest and most miserable of all feelings, fear. Does not every manly man hate himself when he finds himself meanly afraid? Is there anything from which one would wish sooner to be freed? Is not a craven, cowardly soul a nameless calamity? How can we make the perilous pilgrimage of existence without fear? Flesh and blood are weak, nerves are hard to control, the morbid fancy is so active and the selfish heart is so ready to cry out. If we go on our way not alone; if we look at the images of Christ in the hall of the devout imagination; if we trust the Christ who manifests himself through these temporal signs of his eternal being; if we can say from the heart, knowing well the mystery that surrounds the great words, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me," we may go forth in a vast emancipation from fear.

In pain and in panic the penitent thief said, "Jesus, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom." The answer was, "To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." After that assurance through fellowship, here and there, and forever, fear died away in perfect trust. Oh, for the pæan, the tumult of victory, the fearless dash into the smoke of the battle and out beyond it into the eternal sunlight and peace!

In the New Testament there are two views of Christ, that which presents him as wholly outside the life of the individual disciple, and that which presents him as both without and within the disciple at the same time. Paul's great words are, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The external Christ is the Christ of the senses; the interior Christ is the Christ of the soul; and the soul that knows itself in the process of being made like Christ cannot fail of the assurance that the Lord is alive now: that he is accessible; and that the whole hope of the heart that has set itself on doing the will of God lies in the fellowship of the Lord.

GREAT ASSURANCE

Panic in belief is as frequent these days as squalls on summer seas. Progress in knowledge, changes in the relative importance of ideas, confidence in experience, distrust and criticism of the philosophy of it, the subordination of the letter to the spirit, the outward to the inward, are the occasion of these frequent outbreaks of panic among Christian men and women. Let them reassure their hearts in the certain conviction that all the greater things of the Christian faith abide. If a citizen of Boston who lived in that city one hundred years ago were to return he would not be able to find his way in the older streets in which he once felt himself so much at home. But if our friend should come back he would find the old harbor flashing in the sunlight still the same; the rock-bound coast the same; the great sun, the moon, the planets, the heavenly host, just as he left them. The little things change in our faith, so that a Christian coming back, who has been absent from us fifty years, would hardly find his way; but the great things endure forever; they are the same yesterday, to-day

and forever. Think of the great things! Stay your heart on the eternal lights of faith; dwell in the Eternal; the Eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms!





232.5 G 6559

1663

Gordon, George Angier The great assurance

232.5 G655g 1663

Gordon, George Angier

AUTHOR

The great assurance

TITLE

DATE DUE BORE

BORROWER'S NAME

APR 18 1985 Tack. Hoffin

FE25 '97

..

MR15'97

THE MASTER'S COLLECE POWELL LIBRARY SANTA CLARITA, CA 91321



1663

The centre of hope in the Gospels lies in the story of the Ricen Lord.

